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ABSTRACT

A sequence of four central essays on the topic of "experts" illustrates how students can develop the critical tools necessary to handle the flood of information that exists in a complex, expert-dominated world. The first essay begins with communication of shared knowledge and examination of assumptions. Students are asked to share with their classmates an area in which they might be said to have expertise in the form of specialized knowledge, training, or ability. The next essay assignment is to define expertise. Class discussion prepares students to write, and post-essay comments from class discussion are recorded on the chalkboard. At this point little movement has been made toward critical thinking, as the filled chalkboard seems to confirm students' basic assumptions about the topic. The central role of the instructor now is to problematize assumptions, conclusions, and generalizations through the posing of questions. This is followed by short writing assignments and small group work to develop new definitions regarding experts. The third essay assignment asks students to choose a person who is or might well be considered an expert by the general public, to interview this person and to write about the person's expertise. The final essay turns the students' attention on their immediate environment, in which they view critically relationships between teacher/expert and student/layperson. This assignment has an important effect on students' views of knowledge and knowledge acquisition. (KEH)

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4C's Presentation Paper

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When Students Confront the Experts:

Toward Critical Thinking In The Classroom

Since this is a panel concerned with critical thinking, let me begin my presentation by sharing my understanding of that term. Definitions of critical thinking in the literature on this subject vary significantly. Some, for instance, emphasize formal logic or general skills in problem-solving. My working definition of critical thinking is this: the active, sustained consideration of received information using certain evaluative dispositions, such as analyzing arguments, entertaining new possibilities, and understanding assumptions and biases underlying particular positions and interpretations. I'd like to share some particular classroom practices with which I've tried to promote this kind of critical thinking. But first I want to explain why the choice of a sequence, or learning cycle, on

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the topic of experts is particularly fitting for developing critical thinking in today's students. I emphasize *today's* students because life in contemporary America presents unique challenges for educators and students.

One important characteristic of modern times for educated citizens is what I call "information inundation." By this I mean the ever increasing flood of information made available to all of us through expanded media and communications systems. And too, the computer age has made possible great leaps in our knowledge of all areas of science. All of us face the difficulty of coping with the rapid acceleration of the information age and the demands of adequately handling this flood of information that threatens to drown us. We need only to think for a moment of the almost daily reports, frequently conflicting, in the area of health and nutrition, as we ponder, for instance, what bran to choose, to understand the difficulties that face all of us in trying to make sense of this new knowledge. If we consider students for a moment, we see how this group may be in the most confusing, or potentially confusing situation with respect to the character of modern life. Immersed in a system that is constantly bombarding them with information, meanings, interpretations too often passed off as objective fact, they are likely to develop the passivity that Paulo Freire identifies in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* In Freire's terms, the students become "containers" or "receptacles" to be "filled" by the unexamined pronouncements of the teacher.

Unfortunately, many of our institutions continue to stress the acquisition of content, rather than the mental abilities to confront, evaluate, and act upon new knowledge. Students need to develop the critical tools necessary to handle the flood of information that will continue to outpace their quickly obsolete textbooks and their instructors' abilities to impart the essential knowledge of a given subject area.

But why concentrate on experts? Because I would argue that a dominant characteristic of this age, accompanying information inundation, is the proliferation of experts in all areas of our lives. In need of those who can interpret this vast output of information, and in an increasingly technological society with its demands for a specialized workforce, America has come to rely on its experts and their expertise to guide the entire life of the nation. The term expert more often than not conjures a mental picture of a top nuclear physicist or celebrated brain surgeon, but in fact in our era is attached to an almost unlimited number of professions and subject areas in which individuals have some degree of specialized training, knowledge, or skill. Since economic, social, and political institutions, and the lives of individuals are affected at every step by policy-makers, advisors, and specialists, an informed, sovereign individual must be able to think critically about this matter.

As Walker Percy points out in his wonderful essay *The Loss of the Creature*, a loss of sovereignty occurs as we surrender ourselves to "a class of privileged knowers."

Handing over control to another is a transfer of power, and inherent in the act are all the potential dangers that attend such a power transfer. This uncritical, unconditional surrender means that we opt out of the process. The information we receive goes unquestioned, as do the actions that daily affect our lives. We surrender our car to the auto repair expert, we surrender our children to the education specialist, we surrender our marriages to the sex therapists, our diet to the health experts, our beaches to the oil spill experts, our defense to the military and foreign policy experts of the Pentagon, our tax policy to corporate supported economic experts, our adminstering of justice to the expert witnesses in the courtroom.

Clearly, one of the dangers of the growing numbers of experts is that, like a cliche, the term may become cheapened by overuse. Today there is an alarming acceptance of the term, despite its frequent misuse. Like the terms *hi-tech* and *state-of-the-art*, *expert* has become a throw-away term used to impress and mesmerize consumers and citizens with its implied bestowal of superiority and unquestioned authority.

The sequence I present is designed to begin students in the lifelong critical engagement with a complex, expert-dominated world. It's a learning cycle I've thought carefully about, adjusted, and tinkered with, but clearly it's not meant as the blue print for the study of this

issue. Let it instead be suggestive of the rich possibilities inherent in the subject.

An adequately detailed explanation of the four essays completed in this sequence on experts and of the many activities that fill more than half a semester is not possible in my allotted time. What I'd like to do is to give a brief sketch of the four central essays and a few examples of the kinds of activities that I've found helpful in leading students into more critical mindframes.

Critical analysis of any area of study best begins with the communication of our knowledge and the examination of our assumptions with regard to that subject. If you look at the hand-out, you'll note that the first essay, an essay my stduents begin in the first week of class, asks them to share through writing their area of expertise with me and with their classmates. I ask each of them to draw on their own experience, to think about an area in which they might be said to have expertise in the form of specialized knowledge, training, or ability. When writings are shared students are frequently impressed, as I am, by the level of abilities and accomplishments among the class. There are experts in swim instruction, auto mechanics, pizza-making, Buddhism, baseball cards, and civil war battles to name a few. Typically, writers describe their expertise, how they got interested in it, how it was attained, and what they know or can do. It's a positive start to the semester, as many gain a previously lacking sense of pride and

accomplishment when they commit their unique abilities to writing.

The next essay I've listed in the sequence-- Defining Expertise--would be an unpalatable task for students, a throwback to the traditional definition paper, were it not for the classroom activities that prepare it. We begin with a full class discussion. Inevitably, in a few of the first batch of essays, students will have either qualified their expertise, or rejected it outright. They'll write, for instance, "I've had twelve years of gymnastics training, and I've been awarded by my school, but I'm no Mary Lou Retton." In class I'll read these, and then ask the group if any of them are hesitant to consider themselves experts. My experience is that the vast majority doubt or deny their expertise. "Well, for this essay I considered myself expert at such and such, but I really don't know everything there is to know about it, so I'm really not an expert." These kinds of responses lead naturally into the defining of the terms expert and expertise. As with all our large discussions, I ask a student to record all class responses on the board, while another copies them onto paper. I'll copy the notes and distribute them to each student at the next class.

The past three semesters of students have given surprisingly uniform responses to defining the terms. Experts, they say, are people who know everything about a subject. They are authorities in some area. They've

learned all there is to know. They have complete knowledge. I share a standard dictionary definition with them, such as this one from Random House:"expert: n. 1. a person with a high degree of skill or knowledge in a certain subject. adj: having or demonstrating impressive skill, dexterity, or knowledge." We discuss these definitions and soon the class recognizes their inherent vagueness. What, for instance, constitutes a "high degree" of knowledge? What is "impressive skill?" We need to define further. To do so I ask some questions. How is expertise attained? Through education? Training? How much? How is expertise demonstrated? What types come to mind when you think of the word *expert*? At this point, perhaps only a handful of types--doctor, scientist--or individuals--Einstein, Julia Child--are mentioned.

Unless an unusually thoughtful student has challenged these responses, the class at this point has made little movement toward critical thinking. They are now able to view a filled chalkboard that seems to confirm their basic assumptions about the topic. They are either satisfied, or bored. One of the central roles for teachers seeking to move students toward critical thinking is to problematize assumptions, conclusions, and generalizations through the posing of questions. Drawing from the lives of students is the most effective way to engage their interest. In this case I might ask the students to consider their parents. For eighteen or more years, I tell them, your parents have

daily fulfilled the role and duties of that position. Should we consider Mom or Dad an expert in parenting? This kind of a question is like a sudden curveball thrown at a batter grown accustomed to a steady diet of fastballs. Suddenly the game has been problematized, and the batter, and student, must adjust, concentrating more vigorously.

Most students do not regard their parents as experts. But others may disagree, and all of them recognize the dilemma. If someone has done a job day in, day out, for eighteen years, wouldn't we assume that person is an expert? Discussion ensues as to why this is or isn't so. Several students may draw a distinction between parenting, and the mastery of something as a result of education and formal training. If this leads to a discussion impasse, it might be time for another question. What if the students are asked to consider the thirteen years of their lives that they've spent studying, taking notes, preparing for tests. They've been accepted to college. Should they then be considered experts in effective studying? Here too the abstract assumptions expressed on the board meet the test of concrete experience. I might ask them to write for fifteen minutes, taking on the role of "Study Expert," and communicating their expert advice for the benefit of failing younger students. In small groups the students then share and try to determine if a definite set of rules emerges for studying effectively. Inevitably there will be large and small differences in studying approaches. This begs the

question of whether we can expect differences among experts in the same field with regard to conclusions reached and advice given. We discuss that. To conclude the class, I might hand out an article of some sort, perhaps a *New York Times* piece on the difficulty of defining the term *alcoholism*, or the term *obscenity*, as a way of reinforcing the real consequences of what we've been doing and the wide implications for this kind of critical thinking.

Much has been accomplished in this single class period. Students have begun to reexamine the concept that generated their first essay. Their uncritical assumptions have been challenged. Through questioning, brainstorming, drawing upon their own experiences, thinking individually and collaboratively in small and large groups, writing and reading, their critical abilities have been awakened. All of this has brought about that state of disequilibrium that Piaget concludes is so necessary to growth. (A note of caution needs to be inserted here. The experience of having our former certainties challenged or upended, even in small areas, can be unsettling to us all, especially when no new certainties fill the vacated space. Students are no different. For some, the experience of a classroom of this type is energizing and uplifting. For others, the experience may be unsettling, a disturbing challenge that breeds a defensive posture in the early stages. Teachers should anticipate this and rely on patience and understanding to relax that posture over time.)

Having heard a description of this class in some detail, you're now better able to evaluate the effectiveness of essay two, in which students seek to define the term *expert/expertise*. Challenged in their assumptions about who's an expert and what constitutes expertise, students are led to seek answers in essay two by using their own writings from the first essay as raw data. Since I publish my students' essays in booklet form, they are able to examine the concept by analyzing their own essays and the essays of at least two others.

Let me summarize rather quickly some activities that would occur after the completion of this second essay and prepare students for essay three. During this time in class students might work in groups to enumerate as many instances as they can recall in which experts failed or misguided them or people they know. Such things as a doctor's misdiagnosis, a botched auto repair, or a predicted hurricane that never materialized make the list. As a whole class we might discuss times in which society was misguided by so-called experts. We could read and discuss appropriate current events--oil spills, conflicting cancer studies, reports in which products like the Pill or Nutrasweet, or Alar, previously pronounced safe, have been called into question as risky to one's health. We might examine the language used by experts. Does the language used by those deemed authorities differ from that used by the layperson? What is the effect of expert terminology, especially as used

in the sciences, and in the field of advertising. Students examine advertisements, the effect that specialized terminology has on them in television and the printed news media, in textbooks, and in their own writing. They can role-play, with two acting out an office room conversation between doctor and patient while the class observes.

Once again, directing students to collect their own experiences and to reflect on them has moved them toward critical thinking. At this point many have undergone a radical reevaluation of their stance toward experts, experts they now realize play a crucial role in the life of their society.

This healthy skepticism-in-training tests itself in the real world in essay three. Here students choose a person who is or might well be considered an expert by the general public and interview that person. I suggest that they choose to interview a person in an occupational field in which they have an interest. Students get practice in class formulating questions and developing a focus for the interview. They unanimously enjoy and benefit from the interview experience. They are able to test their own formulations concerning experts, to explore the concerns we've explored in class through the individual. For some, the information obtained in the interview results in further reevaluations of their views concerning the subject of experts and their impact on our lives. Additionally, students are able to learn about their field and what it

takes to attain a measure of expertise in it. I've had several students who've abandoned, or considered abandoning, their major area of study after an interview, and several who've discovered a major in the process.

The final essay in this sequence, which I've labelled "Teachers As Experts, Students As Laypersons," turns students' attention on their immediate environment. Since teachers occupy the roles of privileged knowers or authorities in their subjects, they are a kind of expert that the student has had contact with almost daily since childhood. It seems useful then to look critically at this particular relationship between teacher/expert and student/layperson. As students observe and analyze classroom interactions, "teacher-talk," textbooks and assignments, they discover the complexity of that relationship and its effect on their learning. Again, all too often their analyses reveal the relationship to be not unlike that described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Critical thinking spills over into creative thinking in this essay as students suggest alternative environments for learning.

The kind of sequence I've outlined can have an important effect on students' views of knowledge and knowledge acquisition. By "provoking critical reflection on models of authority," (Shor 53) these activities and writings can help students begin to see the relative, rather than absolute, nature of much of the knowledge they receive.

This is equally true of knowledge received from the sciences. Chet Meyers, in *Teaching Students to Think Critically*, writes that

> the bulk of college students and lay individuals continue to look to science as a source of authority and certainty. Perhaps our society's continued faith in science and students' search for certainty are only reflections of a culture dominated by dualistic thinking. Students need to appreciate both the contributions and the relativity of the scientific perspective, and they need to realize that each academic discipline offers its own unique window on reality (117).

By demystifying expertise, authority-dependent individuals can regain independence of thought. In the composition classroom this results in writing, especially issue-related writing, that is no longer the recapitulation of information received from experts, but communication notable for the quality of its critical intelligence. Knowledge acquisition in the classroom becomes active consideration, not passive acceptance. Most importantly, critical thinking helps students overcome the intimidation ever-present not only in the academic world, but in the larger world, where the proliferation of so-called experts, authorities, and opinion-makers increasingly monopolizes our beliefs and the

decisions that affect our lives. We need not be educational experts to recognize the importance of this kind of empowerment.